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ABSTRACT

A modified version of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's approach to literacy training, originally developed to teach Maori children, is described. The adapted method was used in Ecuador in an international literacy education program. With this method, rather than using a text, learners are taught written words important to their lives and are encouraged to write sentences and stories that are shared with the other learners. The basis of the approach is that while rural villagers may have difficulty with traditional approaches to literacy training, their characteristics can also represent a resource and guide for an effective teaching strategy. Since circumstances in Ecuador differed from those in the Maori context, including the teacher's relationship with students, student ages, and less frequent and less structured meetings, they caused some adjustment in the teaching method used. A typical session in Ecuador brings together 15-30 individuals of differing ages for small-group discussion of topics relevant to the participants' lives, writing of sentences using new words learned, reading aloud of those sentences in the larger group, and further discussion. Additional modifications and applications have occurred as facilitators have related their literacy training to other games used in the program. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ASHTON-WARNER LITERACY METHOD

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SUMMARY:

Developed by Sylvia Ashton-Warner for teaching Maori children in New Zealand, this literacy method allows the learner to approach written culture on his own terms. Rather than using a text, learners are taught the words important to their lives, and encouraged to write sentences and stories which are shared with the other learners.

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Technical Notes 1-14 were produced by staff members of the Ecuador Nonformal Education Project. Each note focuses on a particular issue or technique which has been developed and tested in Ecuador. The notes contain the information available at the time of writing and analytic comments based upon available evaluation data. However, the notes are in no way an evaluation of the project. Their purpose is to share ideas and information about new techniques as they are developed. Project staff want to encourage comments and suggestions from readers who may have had experience with similar techniques in other settings.

The project was financed by USAID and was a joint undertaking of the Ministry of Education in Ecuador and the Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts. Ideas and materials derived from the ideas were created jointly by staff in Massachusetts and staff in Ecuador. All materials have undergone considerable change in the field as usage in various situations indicated needed modifications. The notes attempt to accurately credit the creators of each technique. In some cases, though, ideas have been modified by a variety of people and precise assignment of credit is difficult. In all cases, various members of the staff have made substantial inputs into the final version of the materials.

After three years of effort the number of people in Ecuador and in the United States who have made substantial contributions to this project is considerable. Rather than trying to enumerate the particular contributions of each, we will only note that this has been a genuine bi-national effort.

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ASHTON-WARNER LITERACY METHOD

THE NEED

For the rural illiterate, learning to read may be much more than just acquiring a skill. It may mean confrontation with a dominant, alien culture. The immediate surroundings of a rural villager do not include writing. Only when they venture into a town - perhaps to sell their produce - do rural illiterates come into contact with written materials, usually in the form of street signs, billboards, newspapers, and magazines.

The city and its written culture may have many negative connotations for the villager. In the city he is treated like an outsider; he is often abused, exploited and made to feel inadequate. When such a person joins a literacy program and begins to grapple with the written culture, these negative connotations may turn the task of learning to read into a frightening and threatening experience. Often the threat is sufficient to prevent him from enrolling in a literacy program or causes him to drop out after only a few meetings.

A related difficulty facing rural literacy efforts is the lack of suitable reading materials, both for the learner and for the literate person seeking to maintain his skill. Materials of interest to peasants, which describe rural life and use images and ideas drawn from the local culture, help to reduce the learner's feelings of

anxiety and inferiority. Unless the peasant can make reading a part of his life, a part of his regular flow of communication with the outside world, one can hardly expect that newly acquired reading skills will last for long.

In such settings one should not be surprised by the lack of success which many existing rural literacy programs experience. Careful consideration should be given to the problems caused by using reading materials developed and written for rural people by outside experts. Even sympathetic and experienced literacy workers will have great difficulty in creating materials to which a large and diverse group of rural learners can respond with understanding and enthusiasm.

THE SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER METHOD

While rural villagers often seem to be a difficult audience for traditional approaches to literacy training, the characteristics of rural learners can also represent a resource and a guide for an effective teaching strategy. In her work with Maori children in New Zealand, Sylvia Ashton-Warner observed a number of characteristics which seem to have parallels among the people of rural Ecuador.

In both situations the introduction of reading is a cross-cultural encounter; the written culture reflects the values of an alien and dominant culture found in the larger towns and cities. Teachers in the two settings usually represent the dominant culture and assume that literacy is an essential tool for anyone wishing to cope

effectively with the larger society. The following quotation from the book Teacher clearly expresses the idea of the cultural distance to be travelled in learning how to read.

> The method of teaching any subject in a Maori infant room may be seen as a plank in a bridge from one culture to another; and to the extent that this bridge is strengthened may a Maori in later life succeed.* (p.31)

The author's "organic reading" method involves eliciting from each student a key vocabulary of words which are of particular importance to that individual.

> Pleasant words won't do. Respectable words won't do. They must be words organically tied up, organically born from the dynamic life itself. They must be words that are already part of the child's being. (p.33)

The important factor in reducing the threat of a written culture is that each student learns words which have a deep personal meaning for him.

> No time is too long spent talking to a child to find out his key words, the key that unlocks himself, for in them is the secret of reading, the realization that words can have intense meaning. Words having no emotional significance to him, no instinctive meaning, could be an imposition, doing him more harm than not teaching him at all. They may teach him that words mean nothing, and that reading is undesirable. (p.44)

If the words are drawn from within the learner, if the learner perceives that reading can have great meaning to his personal inner life, written culture may not seem so alien or so threatening.

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* This and the following quotations are taken from Sylvia Ashton-Warner's Teacher, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963.

The process begins by asking each individual student what word he wants to learn. When a choice has been made the word is written on a card and given to the student. The word becomes his property - both physically and psychologically. The student writes it in his notebook and later writes it on the blackboard in order to share the word with others.

> Not only do you enter the words they ask for at the back of their books, but, bearing in mind the reading of them afterwards, you watch the spacing of the words for better legibility, carefully oversee the grammar, and, above all, nurture the continuity of their thought. (p.55)

When enough of a key vocabulary has been accumulated students begin to write sentences, and later stories, using their words. Each student's writing is shared with the others. In this manner, over time, students actually write their own primers.

> Key vocabulary is a one-word caption of the inner world, creative writing is a sentence-length or story-length caption. From schematic writing, they progress towards the representational. (p.51)

It is the role of the teacher to facilitate this process, to draw words, sentences, and then stories from the students who are expressing their own inner world. Thus the learners' introduction to written culture proceeds from within, answering his needs for self-expression. Sylvia Ashton-Warner feels that this approach yields completely different results from the more traditional methods of instruction where words, stories, and materials are imposed from the outside.

ECUADORIAN SETTING

In adapting the method to conditions in rural Ecuador three main differences in circumstances had to be acknowledged. These differences affect both the method and the expected results, as will become apparent.

To begin with, teachers in Ecuador generally regard themselves as superior to their students. They typically demand rote memorization and encourage little independent thinking on the part of the students. These behaviors are exaggerated when teachers from the city teach rural children, whom they see as inferior learners. In the case of indian students, who constitute a sizeable proportion of the project's target population, the teachers' prejudices are likely to be even stronger. Clearly, the Ashton-Warner approach is incompatible with a teaching style which does not encourage open dialogue and independent thinking. The project had to take great pains to train group leaders to see themselves not as teachers, but rather as compañeros, friends, and peers of the learners.

It was found that the mere use of the word teacher encouraged the villagers selected from the communities for training to begin acting like traditional teachers. As a result, the word teacher was dropped from the training vocabulary in favor of compañero and facilitator. Thus, whereas Sylvia Ashton-Warner had been able to assume teaching style as something implicit - something which went without saying - once one had studied the method, the project found that in order to

adapt the method to Ecuadorean culture it was necessary to make explicit the nature of the desired relationship between teacher and student. Considerable emphasis was given to this point during the training of the facilitators.

A second main difference in the Ecuadorean setting occurs because non-formal education groups include learners of widely varying ages. Because people at different age levels lead different inner lives, and have different problems, one might assume that as learners they would have little in common and little to share in terms of thoughts or events. In fact, this does not seem to be a problem; small communities have enough shared experiences to feel at home with the Ashton-Warner approach.

Another problem occuring in mixed age-groups relates to the fact that adults, although they have more experience, are likely to be more closed to self-expression than younger learners. The writer often observed that adults prefer taking dictation to writing their own stories. Perhaps this derives from the fact that dictation by the teacher is part of the traditional teaching style. This seems to be part of a larger reluctance on the part of rural adults to believe that they can learn from anyone other than a teacher with a certificate, a necktie, and a firm belief that his students are of limited intelligence.

A final consequence of mixed-age groups is the fact that children are often more proficient at reading and writing than their parents and

often end up correcting their parents' work. The children seem to learn faster, and in many cases they have more extensive and more recent schooling experience on which to draw than their parents do. However, parents generally did not seem to mind being corrected by their children. The Ecuadorean staff were surprised, since in other aspects of rural life children are encouraged not to speak unless spoken to.

A third difference between non-formal education groups in rural Ecuador and Maori classrooms, is that Ecuadorean groups meet less frequently and are not structured as formal classes. In rural Ecuador one cannot count on having the same learners attending regularly. Even though meetings take place daily, the same persons do not come each time. Meetings are generally held at night, after people have put in a long day of hard physical work. Meeting places are often several miles from learners' houses and getting there requires a walk in wet and cold weather. Under such conditions attendance of a given individual several times in the same week requires a substantial effort on his part. As a result, expectations of progress are lower than for children in regular classes in New Zealand.

USAGE

Taking into account these differences, the method was adapted to the Ecuadorean setting and taught to the facilitators as a six step process:

1. Establish rapport with the learners. Appear as a friend and a peer. Be certain to emphasize the differences in your role from that of a traditional teacher.

2. Ask each learner for a word which he wants to learn. Discuss the word with him.

3. Write these words on cards and give them to their new "owners."

4. Have the learners write the words in their notebooks and familiarize themselves with the words.

5. Have volunteers from the group go to the blackboard and write their words on the board and then share them with others by discussing their personal significance.

6. Once learners have acquired a basic vocabulary, have them begin writing sentences and stories and sharing them with the class.

Throughout this process, the facilitator encourages discussion and critical reflection upon the importance and meaning of the words to the group. In Sylvia Ashton-Warner's words,

> From the teachers' end it boils down to whether or not she is a good conversationalist; whether or not she has the gift or the wisdom to listen to another; the ability to draw out and preserve that other's line of thought. (p.58)

Between fifteen and thirty people of all ages generally participate in the night-time meetings where the method has been used. Typically the people will split up into several small groups - one or more playing educational games, one using the Ashton-Warner approach to literacy. The latter group, after meeting together for a short while to discuss new words suggested by individuals, will often separate as individual people become immersed in their notebooks. As they write phrases, sentences, and sometimes short stories, their concentration

is total; the words and the sentences are important and involving for them. Several times during the meeting the group leaders will approach solitary learners and correct their work. At a later point individuals move unobtrusively to the blackboard and slowly scratch out a sentence or two.

After an hour or more the facilitator reassembles the entire group and other activities cease. One of those who has written on the board will read his story aloud. Those who can, read along with him. The stories are usually short and biographical, telling of the individual's life, his work, or perhaps a city he has visited. The group leaders then encourage everyone to discuss the story.

In a given evening, for example, if a learner chooses the word "milk" the facilitator asks questions like: Why is milk important in our lives, in our childrens' lives? Why don't some people have sufficient milk for their families? What happens when children don't get milk? and so forth. In this way the key words serve as vehicles for discussing important issues in the lives of the learners. Literacy then involves issues of community welfare and development and ceases to be an abstract unrelated skill.

Discussion does not always come easily. In one village the writer watched a facilitator lead a discussion on the meanings associated with the word campesino or peasant. Why do we work the land? Why is our work important? Why is it important that we learn to read and write? These were some of the questions raised during the discussion.

To the writer the discussion seemed listless, as if standard questions and answers were being recit d. The students seemed restless. Later the field coordinator for that area was questioned about these impressions. The coordinator explained that campesinos do not learn to express themselves easily in words. They leave home to work in the fields at 5:30 AM and return home twelve hours later to eat dinner and go to bed. They have neither time nor energy to discuss things with their family. When they get together with friends it is usually to drink and not to talk.

One should not be discouraged by the quality of the initial efforts at discussion. The fact that campesinos get together in groups for discussion of important issues is a significant step forward. Also, it is likely that the presence of outsiders inhibits participants' willingness to use newly acquired skills.

Some indication that discussions are followed by effective action is provided by looking at the activities undertaken by two of the communities involved in the project. The community of Puñachizac has gotten together to approach local authorities about the provision of electricity and drinkable water. In the case of the electricity, they first approached the local hacendado for his support since he would also benefit from the access to electricity. Another community, Tutupala, has formed a community store and a forestation cooperative. While the exact relationship between the literacy and discussion activities of the groups in these villages and their subsequent actions is unknown, the indications are at least encouraging.

FURTHER APPLICATIONS

The above description is the most basic application of the adapted Ashton-Warner method. Further modifications have occurred as facilitators have related their literacy training to the various other games being tried by the project. Learners and facilitators see the games and methodologies as part of a whole rather than distinct pieces. As a result, a variety of interesting local blends of specific games and the literacy method have occurred.

In one instance, all words which appeared during the playing of the letter rummy game (See Technical Note #9) are written on the blackboard. When a list of words has accumulated, the facilitator stops the rummy game. Someone comes to the board and reads the words aloud. Others read along with him and write the words in their notebooks. By the end of the meeting several students will have written sentences using words selected from the list and shared them with the others.

A similar process occurred in another community with the letter dice (Technical Note #6). One of the younger girls in the group had a small slate which she placed on the floor next to the dice players. As the words appeared in the dice game, she wrote them on the slate. The facilitator working with the dice game spent part of his time correcting her efforts. Afterwards she read her list aloud to the group, who then wrote the words in their own notebooks for later use in stories. The unknown words were explained and discussed.

A variety of extensions to the previous two processes can be envisioned as players become more confident. In either case, the number of words generated can be used to create a score and thus lend a competitive element to the game. If teams are being used, each team might be required to pronounce the words created by the other team and to use them in a sentence. The combination of increased incentive and the need to use the words would contribute to greater fluency and confidence.

While extensive field usage of the modified Ashton-Warner method has occurred, some problems have been encountered. In several groups interest in the approach seemed to decline after a group of words had been learned and a series of stories written. After a certain point interest seems to lag, and several groups asked to have dictation used rather than writing their own stories. The project staff suspects that some of these limitations are due to the need for further training of the facilitators, to provide them with more options and ways of adding new features to maintain interest. Another limitation is the fact that the facilitators themselves have only limited literacy skills; they are in a real sense peers of many of the learners.

At this point one is forced to reconsider the question of the real value of literacy to a campesino who is going to spend his life in the village. Does he really need literacy to accomplish the things which he can realistically be expected to do in improving life in his community? What motivates him to want to read? Once he has the acquired prestige which comes with being able to sign his name, then what? He

may yearn to share the power which seems to be associated with outsiders who can read, but he quickly realizes that reading and writing ability in the setting of his community will not give him that power. And then there is the ever present question of availability of reading material which makes some sense to him. Even if he could get copies of the newspaper printed in the capital, the learned Spanish in which the paper is written would baffle him and quickly discourage further efforts.

As a partial answer to this difficulty the project has embarked on an experimental series of fotonovelas, a type of photographic comic book. These are patterned after the popular love and action stories which are available in urban areas. However, the novelas commercially available are printed in Mexico or Argentina and depict middle-class, white people in urban settings. The aim of the novelas being produced by the project is to keep the basic approach but transform the characters, setting, and themes to ones familiar to rural Ecuadorians. The first edition is now out and it features Ecuadorian Indians in a conflict with the local authorities as they try to establish a school in their community.

Another approach may be to duplicate and distribute stories written by the more advanced groups using the Ashton-Warner approach. Exposure to such "campesino literature" may stimulate other communities to produce accounts of their own situation. For instance, a story depicting Tutupala's successful negotiations with the provincial governor to purchase supplies for their cooperative store, or Punachizac's

struggle to get electricity and drinking water would likely find enthusiastic reception in other villages. Such reading material would not only be interesting, but it would also increase awareness of alternatives open to communities and encourage efforts at self-development. Inexpensive reproduction devices - like ditto machines - might well be used to set up a regional network for exchanging writing produced by different villages.

CONCLUSION

At this point no systematic experimental data are available on the impact of the modified Ashton-Warner approach described in this note. Informal indications of the method's usefulness are provided by the length of time that groups use the method and the kinds of written materials which they produce. Results in the villages currently working with the method vary considerably and appear to depend on a variety of characteristics of the villages and the groups. What has been established is the feasibility of using such an approach and the ready willingness of many villagers to participate voluntarily. Further development and experimentation is clearly needed in order to produce ways of keeping people involved long enough to reach higher levels of literacy. Current results also raise the question as to the importance of going beyond the basic literacy skills which generate payoffs in terms of status and personal pride. Perhaps for many villagers that is sufficient; other skills may be more important for dealing with issues of direct importance to the improvement of their daily lives.

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